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By Ian Lord

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Rep. Charlie Bass, R-N.H., hosted a town meeting event in Claremont last night and touched upon a number of issues.

Before answering questions, Bass briefly talked about the transportation bill going through Congress. He said the transportation bill hasn't been reauthorized for a long time and the trust fund to pay for road and bridge projects is running out of money.

Bass said both the U.S. Senate and House have different bills on how to address funding for transportation. Going against many of his Republican allies in the House, Bass said he prefers the Senate bill to the House bill, calling it a more "pragmatic" solution.

"Now the situation's completely different and the trust fund's on the verge of bankruptcy," Bass said. "I hope we can get this two-year extension passed sooner rather than later."

After bringing up the federal budget issue, several people asked Bass about differences between a bipartisan proposal- which was based on the Simpson-Bowles plan that he initially supported before it was defeated in the house- and the Republican budget, commonly referred to as the Ryan budget. Bass said both budgets were similar, but a bipartisan effort is needed to rein in the federal deficit. "We know loud and clear where Democrats are on these issues, and where Republicans are," Bass said. "I have supported, and will continue to support, efforts to get this deficit under control."

Based off of the Simpson-Bowles commission, Bass said the budget should represent both expenditure cuts and other sources of revenue. He said the Simpson-Bowles plan calls for a three-to-one cuts to revenue ratio, where the Ryan plan includes a four-to-one ratio.

After the Simpson-Bowles-inspired budget failed, Bass turned his support toward the Ryan budget. He said the Republican budget looks to reform tax policy all across the board, as opposed to enforcing higher taxes on large corporations, which he argued would prevent them from being competitive. He did say, however, that the Ryan Budget doesn't give any more tax breaks to the wealthy than the Simpson-Bowles budget would have.

"Neither bill gives the wealthy any more tax breaks than what they get today," Bass said.

With prices at the pump rising and showing no signs of slowing down, some people last night asked Bass about the country's dependence on foreign oil. He blamed Iran and the value of the U.S. dollar as contributing to high oil and gas prices. He said the country's energy use has increased dramatically for decades, making it difficult for the U.S. energy production to keep up demand.

"Our consumption of energy has gone up enormously throughout the last couple of years," Bass

said. "For all practical purposes, we can't be 100 percent energy independent in this country without negative consequences."

Responding to a question about the nation's own oil production, Bass said drilling is largely dependent on global markets and feasibility to be cost effective. He also said ending taxpayer subsidies for large oil companies isn't an option and would certainly make gas prices even higher. "If you tax them more, it's going to make the gas prices go up, not down," Bass said.

When the discussion turned to the health care issue, Katie Lajoie, a nurse from Charlestown, said she's seen how not having affordable health care impacts families. She said while President Obama's healthcare law has flaws, she supports it and would like to see a single-payer system. She said a lot of the law's criticisms don't accurately address its problems. "There's been a terrible spin on it," Lajoie said. "Everyday I see the suffering that people go through without access to health care."

Bass said he doesn't agree with a single-payer system or the mandate that everybody has to buy insurance, but that there are parts of the Affordable Health Care Act that he wouldn't be opposed to. Keeping health insurance affordable for people with pre-existing conditions and allowing young people to stay on their parents' plans were things that Bass said he wouldn't mind leaving in place.

Continuing his theme of bipartisanship, Bass said the extreme polarization in Congress can be attributed to leadership in both parties. He said top senators and congressmen don't necessarily need to appeal to the independent voters, but politicians from small states like New Hampshire have to pay attention to their constituents' needs.

"They don't have to go home," Bass said of Washington officials. "They're the people who run the show and they set the agenda."

Bass said he doesn't always agree with his fellow Republicans and said his party should spend more time addressing important policies rather than social issues.

"I do believe the social agenda should not be the primary agenda of my party," he said.